



## **Texas House Committee on Higher Education**

### ***Houston Community College Response Relating to Interim Charge 4***

September 1, 2020

Thank you for the opportunity to provide the Committee on Higher Education with information regarding the implementation of certain legislation passed by the 86th Legislature. Our responses to the relevant considerations are available immediately below.

Houston Community College (“HCC”) specifically addresses Interim Charge 4 *which relates to study the prevalence of online courses and degrees in higher education. Examine how institutions providing online courses and programs are accredited, particularly courses and programs originating from states other than Texas. Evaluate how students whose courses and degrees are primarily online perform in terms of persistence and degree completion versus students who take courses in traditional classroom settings. Study labor market outcomes for students with primarily online courses and degrees versus more traditional programs.*

#### **Barriers to Online Learning**

The existing barriers to online learning for students and faculty vary.

Specifically, online barriers to student learning include the following: limited computer literacy, lack of technology and broadband access, and support. Additional issues that relate to students’ personal lives include time management issues, lack of a quiet place in their homes to study, the lack of immediate access to their faculty and peers for support among other considerations.

HCC addressed the absence of technology and related issues for students with financial support for laptops, hot spots, and webcams. We also made Care Calls to students to assess their needs and sought to identify ways that the Institution could intervene to resolve the relevant issues. Finally, HCC established a Virtual Lobby for students to immediately access advisors for information and support.

Faculty members also experienced barriers, particularly those who moved to online/remote learning after the COVID 19 pandemic began. The faculty members’ issues were unfamiliarity with the technology, preference for face-to-face on campus instruction, and not feeling confident working in a virtual and remote environment.

HCC sought to overcome online barriers affecting faculty by providing them mentors and intensive training to assist them with the abrupt transition to a remote learning environment that principally uses technology. This included providing faculty laptops to help facilitate their online instruction and establishing a faculty lounge for ongoing training.

Early during the transition to remote instruction, access to devices was a barrier to students. This issue has largely been resolved, but access to broadband Internet remains a challenge.

Institutions of higher education (IHE) and independent school districts (ISD) devised creative solutions like parking a bus with Wi-Fi in a neighborhood that had little access to broadband. However, this has not been a sustainable long-term solution. For students, other barriers include adapting to a less structured school day without set times for classes, finding a quiet place to study at home, and, for adult students with children, helping their children with online school at the same time they are completing online college courses, and in many cases working remotely. Another barrier has been software compatibility with the variety of devices students use, and in some cases, technology provided by the college such as Chromebooks.

Many instructors had never previously taught online; thus, there was a steep learning curve for them. HCC provided professional development to faculty to ensure they had fundamental skills in online instruction. Faculty teaching labs and career and technical education courses were also especially challenged to develop activities to help students learn the more hands-on components of courses.

Notwithstanding the above-identified issues, faculty found creative solutions to meet student learning needs. For courses with components for which remote learning was not possible, institutions developed procedures for health screenings and distancing to allow some students to come back to campus.

### **Information and Data Available Regarding Long-term Student Success**

HCC students do not take courses exclusively in an online modality throughout their educational journey. In the 2017 national report titled “Digital Learning: Impact on Outcomes, Access & Economics,” the Boston Consulting Group included HCC with data that show the clearest statements on student success. The report highlighted, among other factors, that retention rates are higher at HCC when students take at least one online or mixed modality course. The report also indicated that graduation rates are higher for students taking digital courses relative to students taking only face-to-face courses.

In fact, until September 2018, courses at HCC were discrete offerings – not packaged in a way to allow students to follow a degree plan fully online. Therefore, students would gravitate between online, hybrid, and on campus instruction. While there are programs that are now available fully online, since 2018 there is no evidence that students are exclusively online.

Even before COVID-19, distance education enrollments at Texas public college and universities have been trending upward, increasing nearly two percent from fall 2018 to fall 2019. In fall of 2019 at Texas community and technical colleges, statewide distance education enrollments totaled 800,223 (42% of total SCH), compared to 531,617 (22% of total SCH) at universities (Texas

Higher Education Coordinating Board data). Clearly online education plays an important role at community colleges.

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic spurred a hurried, nearly 100% transition to remote learning across the state (and nationally) in the spring and summer of 2020, making the need to study and understand digital education in all its manifestations even more urgent. At the same time, digital education produces large amounts of data about teaching and learning, including student outcomes, heretofore previously difficult to capture at any scale in face-to-face courses and programs, and these data need to be harnessed effectively to better understand digital education.

### **Lessons Learned**

There were two different categories of students that HCC continued to serve in March through Spring and Summer of 2020. There were traditional online students, relatively familiar with the Learning Management System, who chose to be an online student prior to March 2020. During March 2020, the onset of COVID-19 in our region, many students shifted to remote learning, which is likely a temporary status for them.

The prevailing lesson learned is that some students are not computer savvy and prefer face-to-face instruction. The majority of students lacked the technology needed to quickly pivot to online. The data analysis on student success for remote learning students has not been published to determine the retention, persistence, and success rates of the students in the remote option versus the online modality.

Students and faculty are resilient and will adapt to challenging, changing circumstances. Students and faculty need to be supported to learn how to use online tools, and faculty benefit from professional development about engaging students remotely. The old adage “necessity is the mother of invention” holds true for institutions. Faculty and staff have creatively addressed challenges and in some cases have adopted pandemic practices, like online scheduling of advising appointments, into standard operating procedures.

### **Expansion of Online Instruction**

It is uncertain whether the post-pandemic will result in expanded remote learners and expanded online demand and capacity. It appears that the post-pandemic demand will come from students who are confident online learners and attend institutions where the costs are higher as compared to those at the community college level. Additionally, students will weigh the cost-benefit of paying fees for services at 4-year residential institutions where there are restrictions and that they cannot fully enjoy. So, the expectation is that more students who are familiar with online learning and have access to the necessary computer technology will gravitate to their local community colleges.

Given the diverse learning styles of students, it is likely that those who prefer face-to-face instruction, have difficulty with the technology. For those who have a higher comfort level with the technology, we anticipate that the demand will increase

With the increasing demand, there will be an additional need for qualified faculty to ensure the academic rigor, integrity, and standards for instruction are fully upheld.

The Texas Legislature can address the Digital Divide by working with our telecommunications partners to ensure broadband access that reaches all communities, particularly those in under-resourced areas, and creating a special set-aside in the budget to help fund technology access and/or upgrades. As a funding requirement to public schools, colleges and universities, there should be an annual plan with metrics that explicate how the funds will be equitably distributed with annual performance outcomes to measure success.

### **Quality Online Nursing Programs and Clinical Components**

HCC is not witnessing changes in the quality of education of nursing students, particularly our institution. HCC is utilizing relevant provisions of Texas Board of Nursing rules that allow faculty to teach many of the didactic nursing courses online. Relating to clinical courses, HCC will continue to require all students to complete at least fifty percent of the required hands-on clinical training at a later time when it is safe to train students in health-care institutions.

### **Privacy for Students Utilizing Popular Online Curriculum Packages**

While privacy cannot be 100% guaranteed in all instances, HCC does address privacy concerns by ensuring that all online educational and/or curriculum packages meet the approved and vetted standards of by our institution's IT department.

### **The Impact of Open Educational Resources and the Quality of Online Education**

The Open Educational Resources have been effective at HCC. One of the findings, as highlighted in the Boston Consulting Report's Case Study (funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation) included an extensive review of HCC's online program. It confirmed that OER makes a positive impact. The report, entitled, "Digital Learning: Impact on Outcomes, Access, and Economics," confirms that OER at HCC lowers student cost while improving educational quality with indications of academic students returning to the Institution.